Aftertaste

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/8434063.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Clarice Starling, Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter
Additional Tags:	Ghost Hannibal, sleuthing
Language:	English
Series:	Part 5 of Carrion Comforts
Stats:	Published: 2016-10-31 Words: 3,953 Chapters: 1/1

Aftertaste

by Cadaverish

Summary

Clarice knows something is suspicious about the death of Tobias Budge. She knows the cause of that something is Professor Will Graham and his weird obsession with the long dead serial killer Hannibal Lecter. But Jack Crawford won't believe her unless Clarice gets more evidence. Thankfully, Professor Graham loves throwing dinner parties...

Notes

So this is set in the future and odds are technology will be radically different in 10-ish years but forgive me for not speculating. That's not my jam, ghosts are my jam! And Clarice is my jam I love her so much. Off we go!

See the end of the work for more notes

“Clarice I know you. I know you like to steam roll ahead. Like to go with your gut.” Jack Crawford sat back in his chair tapping his fingers impatiently on the arm of the chair. “But you know who else I know? Professor Graham. Went to undergrad with him. He’s weird, he’s creepy, but he’s not killer.” Jack gestured at the newspaper clippings that ran around his office in their little generic frames. “He’s helped us catch more than a few killers in his day.”

“And you don’t think it’s weird that he and Tobias Budge ran into each other at the opera days before Budge disappeared?” Clarice demanded. Jack sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, “no, Clarice, I don’t.”

“You don’t think it’s weird,” Clarice pressed, “that Professor Graham hadn’t been to the opera in ten years?”

“How do you know that,” Jack asked her firmly. “It’s public record that he donated a bunch of money right out of his PhD and then didn’t donate again until this year,” Clarice answered, feeling her footing becoming less steady, “why the gap; he’s been tenured since he got hired.”

Jack hummed, unconvinced but entertaining her. She went on, “you know also took all his victims without a trace? Hannibal Lecter. You know who Professor Graham did virtually all of academic work on? Hannibal Lecter.”

“Hannibal Lecter,” and right away his tone told Clarice she had lost him, “was a vicious cannibal with surgical training and practice evading the law. Professor Graham is a vegetarian with seven dogs and crocheted chair covers.”

“He’s not a vegetarian,” Clarice grumbled, “*I’m* a vegetarian and that stuff he eats is not tofurky!”

Jack held up his hand for silence and her jaw clicked shut. “No, Clarice. I’m sorry but no. You need to drop this, you need to leave this alone, and you need to do your homework.”

Clarice seethed, balling her hands in her lap and fighting back tears. This was the best lead anyone had in the disappearance of Tobias Budge and she was being ignored because she was a young female candidate.

“Listen,” said Jack taking pity, “if you want, I’ll ask Will to have you to one of his dinner parties. You can maybe meet his dogs, admire the crochet.”

“And if I find something?”

“Well if you find something that you didn’t obtain through an illegal unsanctioned investigation or through criminal trespassing,” Jack leveled a firm stare at her, “you come back to me and we talk it over again. But Clarice, you’re not going to find anything. Will is a good guy.”

Clarice clenched her jaw and stood, hefting her heavy backpack from where it slouched against the plush chair facing Jack Crawford’s desk. Jack had an expression somewhere

between patronizing and fond; Clarice hated it. She bit out at thank you and stalked out of the office.

-x-

The next week Clarice bicycled out to Professor Graham's house. It was fall and her bicycle wheels clattered through fallen leaves while the cooling air bit at her cheeks. Her phone was mounted on the handlebars giving her directions up the winding hill through the woods.

The driveway was well hidden, a graveled path that sloped down off the road. There was a snowplow marker that had fallen flat and a mailbox in natural tones, certainly the house wasn't visible from the road; if the phone hadn't chirped a turn alert at Clarice she would have missed it.

She coasted down the driveway, knees bent to absorb the shock of the uneven graveled surface. The house rose up before her as she descended, a hulking old house with a freshly painted porch wrapping around the walls and an elaborate roof with long shallow slopes and folding peaks.

Clarice pedaled slowly through the visitor's cars and stopped the bike. As she unclasped her helmet, she could hear talking and laughing, the faint sound of music being played from inside. The quality of the light spilling from the windows was strange, though, too orange and too inconstant.

Clarice stumped up the porch steps in her fresh polished boots, the nicest shoes she owned and could bicycle in, with the intention of peering in the windows before she went inside but as soon as she was on the porch properly the front door swung open.

She had seen Professor Graham around the campus at Quantico but seeing him in his natural habitat was different somehow. He was wearing a less conservative suit for one thing, a rich blue that draped artfully over his more casual but doubtless horribly expensive white shirt. "Ms. Starling, is it?" he asked.

He had a reputation for being a hard professor who knew when you hadn't done the reading and punished you for it by cold calling you. Faced with his admittedly warm but challenging stare Clarice understood the reputation. She stuck out her hand to shake his. "Thanks for letting me come," she tried, still not sure how on board he was with Jack foisting her into his party.

"It's a pleasure, Professor Crawford doesn't pick favorites lightly," he said easily standing back and waving her into the foyer. Clarice gave the safety of the world beyond the walls a last forlorn look as the door swung closed.

Standing inside, she saw that the light she had seen outside was the product of oil lamps. It was so bizarre that for a moment Clarice stood confused just staring at the flames in their glass containers up on the wall. "Eccentric, I know," said Professor Graham from close behind her, "but my eyes are sensitive to bright light."

“Um,” said Clarice intelligently, spinning to face him. He seemed to grow taller before her eyes though his expression remained smooth as marble. Abruptly the effect vanished and he stood before her classically handsome and charmingly self-effacing. “Are you old enough to drink, Ms. Starling?”

“What, yes, of course,” Clarice sputtered her train of thought catastrophically derailed, “um, but I don’t.”

“Tell you a secret,” said Professor Graham voice pitched conspiratorially low, “neither do I.” He held up a finger and vanished into the cavernous kitchen, returning with a wine glass filled with sparkling golden liquid. “Grape juice,” he told her quietly, “the others will be terribly impressed if you sip it slowly.” Clarice did not think that anything about her in her box store dress and wind-chapped face would impress the people who attended Professor Graham’s parties but she trailed after him silently as he lead her into a richly appointed sitting room. The room itself was dominated by a weirdly shaped piano, as Clarice stepped fully into the room she realized it wasn’t a piano at all but a harpsichord.

Professor Graham was introducing her, but her mind was working too fast to pay attention to the playful banter being lobbed back at him by the partygoers. The wallpaper in this room was quite old, she thought, especially in comparison with the sleek modern paint in the foyer. The effect was exacerbated by the brassy oil lamps and the eclectic collection of artwork hat cluttered the walls. Her gaze was captured by a pencil sketch of a man pulled open to show his organs, something about it was familiar as if she’d seen it somewhere before.

Clarice didn’t have the time to make the connection before she was swarmed by a few chattering smiling adults, their breaths thick with alcohol. It was ridiculous to think of them as adults, she was herself an adult she reminded herself and nearing acceptance as an agent with the FBI, but it felt that way in this claustrophobic sitting room pulled out of time. She was battered with questions about her schooling and what she thought about Virginia, where she had been born, and the usual nonsense older people liked to ask when presented with a student.

“Seen any ghosts, Ms. Starling?” asked a younger man with an obnoxious bowtie.

“I’m sorry,” she responded, something she seemed to be stuck staying this evening.

“Brian Bloom,” he told her shaking her hand brusquely. “My mother hates that I go to these parties, of course, but Professor Graham is the best in the field for a reason.”

“I have,” Clarice said slowly after confirming her conclusion with herself, “exactly no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, don’t you know? This house belonged to Hannibal Lecter. It’s supposed to be dreadfully haunted.” Brian told her wiggling his dark eyebrows with aloof amusement. The revelation gave Clarice goosebumps all over. She wanted to run out the door.

“You know who he is, don’t you?” Brian asked, clearly winding up to explain him to her.

“I know who he is,” Clarice snapped, shifting her stance to try to ease her full body shiver, “but what’s your mother got to do with anything?”

“Dr. Alana Bloom?” Brian asked, expression trying for pompous and ending up beseeching, “she went to school with Professor Graham when all those murders, well, disappearances, happened.”

Clarice wondered if there was an empty place in her puzzle shaped like either of the Blooms but thought there probably wasn’t. She had hoped for a snoop around the house while the adults gossiped.

She hadn’t known Professor Graham abstained from alcohol, she had hoped he would get a little tipsy with his friends and she could poke her nose where it had no business being. As it was, she was going to have to rely on the infinitely indiscreet Brian Bloom.

“Did your mother know Tobias Budge?” she asked him, and his jaw clicked shut in surprise as she cut off his tangent.

“Do you mean the violinist who cut and run on the Baltimore Orchestra?” Brian asked, drawing in another breath as he readied himself to regurgitate everything he’d ever heard on the subject at her.

“Sure,” she agreed, bracing herself. Tobias Budge certainly hadn’t cut and run, she doubted very much that he had gone anywhere willingly. Ultimately, Brian proved utterly useless on the topic and despite her best efforts Clarice couldn’t manage to shrug him off before dinner.

Dinner itself was utterly frustrating because Clarice couldn’t ask anything of substance. Brian wanted to chatter about his thesis and the older adults wanted to talk about themselves. Clarice poked at her dishes suspiciously, trying to verify each ingredient before ingesting it.

When the exhausting seven courses had finally finished, Graham’s dinner party tumbled drunkenly towards the sitting room once more, shepherded by the amused professor himself. Try as she might, Clarice couldn’t make head or tail of him. She wanted to know which of his selves was the real one, the tall sharp one or the smaller shyer one. Both made appearances over the course of dinner but they moved so fluidly through him that she couldn’t pin down where one ended and the other began.

Clarice hovered at the margins until she was sure she had been forgotten and then slipped out of the room. She crossed the foyer and into the study and ever so slowly tugged at the desk drawers. Thumbing rapidly through the folders all she found were Graham’s teaching materials, including one labeled “worst ever essays- do not read sober”. The bookcases in that room were an eclectic mix of psychology, criminology and, bizarrely, fly fishing.

Remembering her childhood-self hiding her diary inside of a shitty reader’s digest copy of Treasure Island, Clarice pulled down “The Entomology of Fly Fishing” and flipped it open. She was deeply disappointed to find it was indeed a thorough description of various bugs.

Clarice replaced the book and passed through the short alcove between the study and the kitchen. She saw nothing in that room besides dirty dishes and so retraced her steps back to

the foyer. Her grandmother's house had had a secret room tucked under the stairs, the door masked in the wooden paneling. She felt a thrill when she found a similar arrangement on the side of Graham's staircase.

The door swung open with pressure and a Clarice found a steep stairwell leading to a narrow room lined with wine bottles. She didn't know what she had been expecting, maybe Budge's body laying spread eagle on the floor in a pool of blood, but the room was empty of everything but wine.

"Reconsidering your stance on drinking?"

Clarice startled badly, Graham had seemingly materialized from nothing scant inches behind her. She hadn't heard a single footstep on the stairs or the prickle on the back of her neck warning her that someone was behind her.

She gaped like a fish at him, her mouth struggling to form words but producing nothing, her back to the wine rack. Graham smiled pleasantly at her, but to Clarice's mind it read as a sinister smirk. He prowled closer to her, and reached for her throat. She pulled her chin down, trying to keep her windpipe obscured. Graham's hand bypassed her throat, wrapping instead around the neck of a bottle of wine in the slot just over her shoulder, and then he left with it feet thumping loudly on the stairs.
Clarice trailed meekly after him, heart thudding wildly.

She had just reached the hallway and was standing aside for Professor Graham to shut the door to the wine cellar when she heard a deafening bang followed by a cacophony of screaming.

Clarice shot past the professor and followed the noise to the sitting room. The dinner guests surrounded a woman on the harpsichord bench who was thrashing wildly. Clarice pressed up against the crush and was eventually better able to see what had happened: the woman was caught in the harpsichord. The cover which closed over the keys had apparently closed on her fingers and there was a splash of blood over the ornate wood.

"Alright, alright," said a pale doughy man. "I'll drive her to the hospital, Betty can you get her bag and coat?" Betty swept off to get what was required and the pale man directed people to picking up the injured woman and handing off the keys to his car while he called ahead to the hospital.

"Thank you Franklyn," said Professor Graham. He handed Clarice a bag with ice in it. "Clarice, can you get her fingers, the lid has a trick to it."

Graham fitted his fingers into a few secretive gaps in the body of the harpsichord and lifted the lid. Clarice gulped at the sight of the four fingers left behind on the slender keys. She watched, as if from a distance, as her own hands reached out and picked up the fingers and deposited them in the zip lock bag.

"Thank you, Agent," said Franklyn who Clarice now remembered from the dinner chatter as being a pediatrician. He smiled at her and Clarice almost forgave him for patronizing her.

Abruptly, she and Professor Graham were alone in the room together.

“Is this harpsichord strung with gut?” Clarice asked before she could think better of it.

“Absolutely,” Graham confirmed from behind her, “it’s a more authentic sound.”

“Was this Hannibal Lecter’s harpsichord?” Clarice asked him. She turned to look at him but found the room utterly empty.

Spooked, Clarice wondered if she had heard the professor’s voice at all. She trailed faintly towards the main door thinking to slip away and call the evening a loss.

“Do you have a particular interest in Dr. Lecter?” Professor Graham asked her. He stood in the doorway to the study. A fire had been lit behind him and the inconstant light threw harsh shadows over his face, leaving the majority entirely in shadow.

“No,” Clarice demurred, her voice strained and harsh.

“So why pull strings with Professor Crawford to come here tonight?” Graham pressed. He was eerily still, perfectly motionless in the doorway.
Clarice thought back to Brian Bloom chittering and chattering about Professor Graham’s credentials.

“I haven’t had a class with you yet. I heard you were the best at crime scene deductions.” It sounded stilted and unconvincing, even to her.

“It’s induction, really,” Graham corrected her, “what was it you wanted to ask me about Tobias Budge?”

Clarice’s heart froze in her chest, she had to consciously work to let out the breath in her lungs.

“Go on,” Graham said softly, “ask me.”

“I just wanted to know what happened to him,” Clarice answered, barely above a whisper.

“Ms. Starling did you know that Baltimore is the birth place of the modern Talking Board?” Graham asked her and the abrupt change of topic hit Clarice like a physical thing. He reached out and took her shoulder, leading her bodily into the study and motioning commandingly towards one of the square chairs.

“You’d know it as a Ouija board, I expect,” Professor Graham continued, voice settling into a familiar lecturing cadence. “The game began in China, we think,” Graham told her, walking over to the mantelpiece and tapping a beautifully engraved Ouija board that hung there, framed and behind glass with its planchette suspended over the center of the board. “It rose in popularity in the western sphere with the rather racist fascination with ‘spritualism’,” Professor Graham rolled his eyes
conspiratorially towards Clarice who only shrank further back into her chair. He seemed to be getting taller again, taking up more and more of the room until every shadow rang with his voice.

He paused, in that awful way teachers had of knowing exactly when you had lost the plot.

“I didn’t know that,” Clarice answered, dutifully, then annoyed at her obedience followed with “but what does this have to do with the disappearance of Tobias Budge?”

“Tobias Budge the Third, properly,” Graham corrected with strong sarcastic note. “As for what this has to do with Tobias Budge,” Graham continued, pausing his restless pacing and addressing Clarice over his shoulder, “nothing; it just interests me.”

“Bullshit,” snapped Clarice and immediately regretted it.

Graham turned to face her properly, his expression challenging. “Oh?” he asked her.

“Everything you do is some bizarre joke nobody is allowed to properly understand,” Clarice said in a rush, figuring she couldn’t dig her way back up she might as well go deeper. “This crap about the talking board,” she took a deep breath, “you know he’s dead. You know for a fact Tobias Budge is dead.”

“And how would I know that,” Graham pressed voice silky and dark.

“The usual reason,” Clarice concluded challengingly.

Graham laughed aloud at that, a harsh barking sound that echoed off the walls. “The usual reason is it? What is the usual reason, then?”

“You were there when he died!” Clarice exclaimed, standing from the chair. Graham watched her, apparently utterly relaxed in the facing chair.

“Why was that,” he coaxed.

“Because you, you,” Clarice tried to finish, to say ‘because you killed him,’ but the words were stuck in her throat. She stared furiously at the professor and her eyes caught on the darkness behind him. The oil lamps had been put out and the fireplace was the only source of light in the room. The shape she saw didn’t catch the light, but was instead darker than the darkness. She saw the line of a shoulder, the curve of a jaw.

Clarice took a step back, tripping on the chair behind her. She managed to catch the arm of the chair with one hand and stood properly. The shadow behind Professor Graham wasn’t there, or she thought wildly, she wasn’t allowed to see it any more.

“Why would I kill a trombonist with no particular talent,” Graham asked in a voice that reminded Clarice of every time she had taken a test she hadn’t studied for, “playing for an art form I don’t particularly like.” Something clattered and from the corner of her eye Clarice saw the planchette on the Ouija board over the fireplace wobble on its chain. Graham smiled, so fast she almost missed it, the first genuine smile she had seen from him all evening, somehow that made it worse.

“His grandfather was one of Hannibal Lecter’s patients,” Clarice tried, hating that her voice wobbled. Graham’s eyebrows rose and he said: “oh so you did more than dream up a wild accusation about the nearest person who gives you the creeps. Go on.”

“Tobias Budge the First was a patient of Hannibal Lecter. You wrote about him. You’re obsessed with Hannibal Lecter. Tobias Budge vanished after being treated by Lecter and now Tobias Budge the Third has vanished after running into you, you’re imitating a serial killer.” Clarice finished triumphantly, bizarrely gratified Graham had patiently listened to her theory when Professor Crawford hadn’t bothered to let her start. The gratification melted into fear again and she started edging towards the foyer, moving her feet ever so slowly.

“Hannibal Lecter didn’t kill and eat Tobias Budge the First. If you read my article you know Budge went to Canada to play for an orchestra there. I’ve done a pretty poor imitation if what you say is true.”

“Budge fled rather than be killed and eaten,” Clarice said, edging still further from Graham. She was nearly out of the circle of firelight, nearly a stride from the foyer. She could jerk the door open, jump the porch steps and run with her bike to the road. “Because he returned, even if he returned as his grandson, you punished him on Lecter’s behalf.”

“Well now you’re confusing me,” said Graham, smoothing an invisible wrinkle in his trousers. If he noticed her molasses slow escape he didn’t make any sign of it. “Am I imitating Hannibal Lecter or acting on his behalf?”

Clarice’s eyes flickered back to the framed Ouija board. “Oh,” she said softly. “You think you can talk to him.” Suddenly she became aware the room was cold. Bitterly cold, as if she were not inside a fire-warmed room but outside in the depths of winter.

Abruptly the oil lamps roared to life simultaneously, but the light was wrong it was too pale too distant and Clarice realized the flames weren’t right because they were a pale blue. In the wan light she saw the shadow behind Graham again but it wasn’t a shadow any more. Instead she saw, plain as if he stood there in the flesh, a tall broad shouldered man with craggy cheekbones and ink black eyes.

“Very good, Clarice,” said the man behind Graham and she immediately recognized the voice as the one she had heard when she was alone with the bloody harpsichord.

Clarice screamed and bolted for the front door, tears streaming from her eyes when it opened under her grasping hands. She leapt over the porch, missing the steps and grabbing her bike where it leaned against a column. She ran for the road, slipping on the gravel driveway and stumbling in the uneven surface.

Behind her, Clarice heard laughing and then the sound of running footsteps, easily gaining ground on her. Breath was hot on her neck and she ran still faster, lungs clenching painfully and she flew with her bike for the road.

Her feet hit pavement and the presence behind her vanished abruptly. Clarice flung herself onto the saddle of her bike and peddled for all she was worth. When she made it out of the woods and felt better she was safe, she fished her phone out of her pocket and set it in the cradle on her handlebars. She called for the AI to direct her back to her dorm. The phone lit up and she saw one missed text. It was from an unknown number.

It read: **Enjoyed meeting you very much. You have a very inquisitive mind. Quid pro quo, Clarice.**

End Notes

Okay so this is It! No more ghost hannibal, sad. Not from me anyway, I'm sure there's more supernatural cannibals on the horizon. Thank you so much for reading, I hope you loved Clarice as much as I loved writing her. Please let me know if you spot fuckups or want me to tag something. Feel free to say anything, really, it's all very welcome. As always my tumblr is the same name so feel free to say hey over there. Thank you so so much again, this was just a blast and a half to write and it's so cool I had you all along for the ride! And, of course, happy Halloween.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!